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Family reports whole ancestral graveyard excavated near Aghdam

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The problem of grave desecration in the Karabakh region during and after the conflict has been one that has met limited attention from local consulates or the international community. Yet, the excavation of human remains and displacement of them has been a harsh reality of the Karabakh conflict.

During the Second Karabakh War, multiple incidents of bomb damage to graves in the general vicinity of Aghdam

were reported by various news outlets including Sputnik Azerbaijan and Jewish Journal. As the dust settles, families come forward to report what they have learned from their relatives who have visited the scene. Whole family cemeteries have not only been demolished by the ordinance of war, but they have also been desecrated, excavated, and the ancestors have been scattered to an unknown relocation or misuse.

Lenta news, a division of Rambler Media in Russia, reported that some of the grave excavations observed in Karabakh were Armenian efforts to repatriate their familial remains, of people who had died and been buried in the occupied zone in the years since the First Karabakh conflict. The Lenta report recounts incidents of this in Kalvachar. Reports of this family disinterment of graves also appeared in Sputnik. Now, Azerbaijani families who trace their heritage to the area, report that their graves were likewise disinterred at some interval within the last 30 years of Armenia's occupation in this region.

France 24 reports the destruction of Aghdam.

One family, who has asked to remain anonymous for their privacy during this difficult time, discovered the ultimate act of ethnic cleansing as news came to them from Aghdam. Republic Underground interviewed a member of this family, who asked to be identified by the name "Sumaya Anna", who spoke on the behalf of her entire family on their shared horror and sorrow at the events that were discovered after the end of the Karabakh war. "Sumaya Anna" chose the name "Sumaya" after her great grandmother and "Anna" after her great aunt, both of whose graves have been completely dug out since the conflict erupted.

She recalls how her entire family can trace their history to Karabakh, especially the area within the vicinity of Shusha and nearby Aghdam. The family's history in the Karabakh area has been recorded as far back as 1753, with ancestral burial grounds in the Shusha area spanning nearly 300 years. In more recent history, Sumaya Anna's maternal great grandfather lived through the 1920 era pogrom of Shusha. He later moved to Aghdam to start a wine business. The family laid down renewed roots in Aghdam from this time.

All of her family was laid to rest in the beauty of her childhood hometown. The family was displaced from the region throughout Azerbaijan and scattered abroad when war broke out in 1989.

Aghdam is approximately 16-20 miles away from Khankendi and is even closer to Eskeran. The approximate distance between Aghdam and Shusha is 24.2 miles. The family is scattered throughout the world and all within Azerbaijan, but a few of them live near one another in Barda. One cousin recently fought in the Second Karabakh War, in the field near Fizuli and Shusha.

It was from the relatives living in Barda that Sumaya Anna learned the bitter truth. A truth that has been overlooked by the international community and governments.

“All members of my mother’s side were buried in Karabag,” said Sumaya Anna.

“I never ever, not even once could have thought the graves would be gone. There are no graves left. Absolutely nothing is left. I want to go, but my husband doesn’t want me to go.I was told only a few graves on the parameters of the cemetery are left, but the gravestones have been knocked out,” said Sumaya Anna.

To add cruel insult to an already gutting injury, gravestones were not the only element of the family cemetery in the area to be desecrated. The graves appear to have been completely excavated as well.

“It wasn’t a new excavation as I was told human bones or the fragments of the bones are ‘blackened’,” said Sumaya Anna.

“I cannot tell you how many hours I have spent online searching what can be made with or how human bones could be used.”

The family’s agonizing questions regarding their loved ones’ remains are left echoing into the abyss of a post-conflict reality. Sumaya Anna noted that her family is exhausted from the stress of surviving total displacement from the First Karabakh War, and the bombing of Barda during the Second Karabakh War. Grateful now simply to be alive, they feel that there is not much that can be done in the aftermath of the desolated cemetery. Yet, Sumaya Anna noted that this devastating blow of relatives removed from graves was not only the injury of indignity, but also came from the fact that she could remember some of her great aunts and uncles in life. Her great aunt died in 1989.

She recalls the beauty of her childhood Aghdam, but it is tempered with the immense weight of sorrow.
“My mom’s cousin used to carry me on his shoulders around the apple orchards of our house in Aghdam. I really feel like my soul and my spirit are broken. I feel that my humanity has been robbed from me. I fight so

hard not to lose my humanity. I keep reminding myself that I cannot only see an enemy in Armenians," said Sumaya Anna, while noting that this is something she finds difficult to remember when she visualizes her displaced departed family, as the living and the dead together have been expelled from Karabakh.

"I cannot help but visualize how they excavated the graves. There was a point after I received the news, I went into an emotional shock. I was in such a shock I couldn't remember my own name. I could remember my last name, but imagine that you cannot remember your first name. I kept telling myself 'I know what my last name is, but what's my first name?"

She noted that she had no illusions that her family's cemetery would have been maintained, yet, the brutality of the treatment it received came as quite a shock.

"I wasn't expecting homes left behind, I wasn't expecting that the graves would be kept well. What I was expecting was grass and trees grown over the graves, and some headstones knocked down, and so on. But graves being dug out, excavated, small human bone fragments left behind isn't something I was prepared to hear. I want answers. It is going to be my goal to find out. I don't know how but someone somewhere knows what happened to our people's remains."

Sumaya Anna expressed the eagerness of the displaced to return to Karabakh and start the process of salvaging the area. She noted the long-term traumas that the conflict has left on the Azerbaijani people. She described the Karabakh War circumstances as an ultimate ethnic cleansing.

"If that (the grave desecration) isn't the ultimate ethnic cleansing, then I don't know what is. The Karabakh War was waged against the dead, not just the living. For me, this is a classic and patented sign of ethnic cleansing. Armenia wanted the land and not the people who lived there. Everyone is so worried about Armenian heritage in

Azerbaijani lands that no one cared then, and no one cares now about our trauma."

The war that was against the living and the dead also claimed the lives of those who had not yet been born, closing completely the cycle of ethnic purge from the Karabakh region.

"When my aunt fled her house, she said that before she left she watered all her garden and fed her animals, thinking that she would return in a few days. She was five months pregnant then. She miscarried that child due to stress."

A few days turned into thirty years, and Sumaya Anna's aunt's child never saw the family's hometown. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan continues to experience a revived displacement crisis of both its living and its dead, with whole generations disappearing from their graves without a trace.

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